

>>> THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

*for the National Capital Region*

# PARENT LEADERSHIP

This issue brief is part of a series examining major issues affecting immigrants and communities of color in the Washington, DC metropolitan region. It has been prepared for public officials, grantmakers, business leaders, community, neighborhood and school activists, and individuals who are seeking ways to build community and improve the quality of life in the metropolitan Washington region.

*Parent Leadership: Investing in Children’s Academic Success* is sponsored by The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region through the work of two funding collaboratives—the Common Ground Fund and the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants. Through these funding collaboratives, the foundation invests in community efforts that address social justice issues impacting immigrants and communities of color.

**The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region** facilitates individual, family, and organizational giving at all levels to create a permanent source of philanthropic capital to improve the quality of life in the metropolitan Washington region. The foundation connects its donors to organizations providing impactful programs; serves as a convener and catalyst on emerging issues; and provides sound financial management of assets.

**The Common Ground Fund** was established in 1996 in response to rising tensions within diverse neighborhoods in the Greater Washington region. The fund’s mission is to address social justice issues impacting communities of color with a focus on investing in racially diverse neighborhoods.

**The Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants** was established in 1998 to help immigrants to obtain U.S. citizenship. This funding collaborative has developed into a strong regional leadership group that plays an important role in the development of emerging immigrant leadership and in the protection of legal rights.

# 1

## INVESTING IN CHILDREN'S

>>> ACADEMIC SUCCESS





## >>> Forward

by Terri Lee Freeman,  
*President of The Community  
Foundation for the  
National Capital Region*

Children have a love of learning and a desire to succeed. Our area schools are filled with hundreds of thousands of students who are happy to be there, eager to learn, waiting to be nurtured—regardless of their race, ethnicity or class. We are incredibly fortunate to have so many dedicated, compassionate, and innovative teachers and administrators supporting and challenging these kids. But the safe and positive environment that schools try to foster is being overshadowed by other challenges—drastic cuts in funding, aging facilities, overwhelming bureaucracy, and a need for qualified teachers.

The desire to learn is one of humanity's unifying traits. Yet as our schools face these mounting challenges and students' needs become more complex, many children are not able to get what they need from the system even though

public investment in public education across the region remains above the national average of \$7,734 in 2002:

- \$11,847 per student, Washington, DC (2003);
- \$9,153 per student, Maryland (2003); and
- \$7,822 per student, Virginia (2002).

Dollar for dollar, scores of children aren't profiting. They are struggling and they are failing. In the Washington, DC region, the *achievement gap* (the disparity between the academic performance of different groups of students) between minority students, especially African-American and Latino students, and their White and Asian-American counterparts, is at a crisis point. Despite modest gains in closing the achievement gap in the 1970s and 1980s when the federal government focused on improving educational opportunity and reducing poverty, the numbers are again slipping. Public education in this country must be ready and willing to meet the needs of our diverse student population and successfully teach all children at high levels. There must be equity for our students.

# 3

In recent years, the No Child Left Behind Act and other local, state, and federal initiatives have enacted new standards and measures for accountability. School officials want to—and have to—change the situation, but how? Almost every jurisdiction in the region has introduced new academic learning standards yet some schools are still being listed as “in need of improvement” for failing to make adequate yearly progress on the Stanford 9 standardized test. As researchers, school personnel, and community leaders across our region try to close the gap with new standards, parental involvement has emerged as one of the most effective approaches to closing the achievement gap.

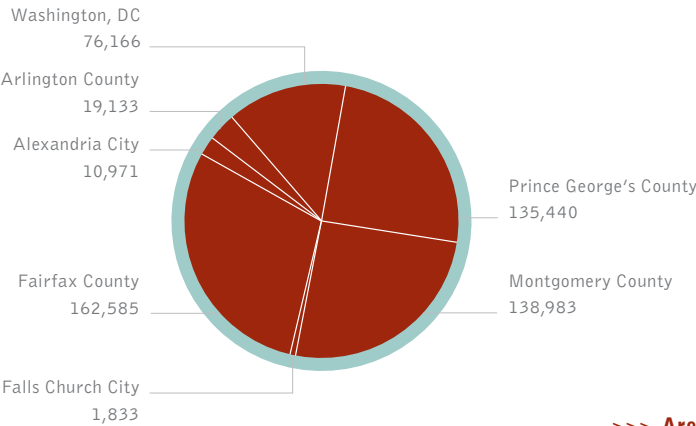
We know that tossing one answer out for a complex problem won’t offer up a long-term solution. Closing the region’s achievement gap among African-American and Latino children requires more than increased budgets, improved facilities, or additional staff. *This critical issue requires a comprehensive, community-based approach because a child’s education is a responsibility shared by school, family, and community stakeholders during the entire period the child spends in school.* And one of the first places to start is with parents.

We are committed to encouraging and increasing parental involvement in children’s schooling in order

to build academic success, close the achievement gap, and improve lives. The Community Foundation, through its Common Ground Fund and the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants, is proud of our investments in this critical matter and in the wonderful area leaders and projects profiled on these pages. We invite you to use this issue brief, *Parent Leadership: Investing in Children’s Academic Success*, to help inform you of ways to build community and improve the quality of life in the metropolitan Washington region.



Data from the nation's report card (the National Assessment of Educational Progress) shows that by the end of fourth grade, African-American, Latino, and poor students of all races are two years behind other students. By eighth grade, they have slipped three years behind. And when they reach twelfth grade, poor and minority students are about four years behind. This means that the average 17-year old African-American and Latino student is at the same educational level as a 13-year old White student.



>>> Area Public School Enrollment—2004

K–12 System-wide Data for DC Public Schools—2005		
	Reading Proficiency	Math Proficiency *
White	84.1 %	85.8 %
Hispanic	41.0 %	55.8 %
Black	36.4 %	40.3 %

9–12 System-wide Data for MD Public High Schools—2005		
	Reading Proficiency	Math Proficiency
White	76.0 %	71.2 %
Hispanic	56.6 %	41.9 %
Black	46.8 %	29.9 %

K–12 System-wide Data for VA Public Schools—2004		
	Reading Proficiency	Math Proficiency
White	81.4 %	83.0 %
Hispanic	67.1 %	69.9 %
Black	60.6 %	62.3 %

\* Reading and Math Proficiency (RaMP)—An overall measure of the percentage of all reading and math tests that have received a score of “proficient” or higher. As part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, all students are expected to be proficient in both of these subjects by 2014. RaMP shows how close a school, school district, or state is to reaching this NCLB goal overall. In addition, RaMP provides a starting point to understand the overall performance of a school, district, or state—a place to begin to “drill down” into more detailed information.



## >>> **Regional Needs and Innovative Approaches**

These figures illustrate stark disparities. They are startling, sad, and, all too often, easy to ignore.

Despite all of the criticism, the No Child Left Behind Act has created a climate where this data does matter, especially for schools looking to federal funding. Yet the data shouldn't be used solely for accountability, it should also help determine the needs of individual students and be used to help improve their education. As states look to revamp the education process, raise academic standards, and hold schools accountable, the necessary supports and resources must also be provided to close the gaps.

In the research study, *It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement Gap*, the Center on Education Policy puts forward a set of strategies for helping to close the gap: getting more experienced and better trained teachers into high minority schools; lowering class size in schools with high minority enrollment;

increasing participation of minority students in challenging academic coursework and rigorous instruction; expanding the opportunity for minority children to attend high-quality preschools; and providing extended learning opportunities, such as summer programs, for students falling behind. Additional research shows that when schools, families, and communities work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. Yet the idea of parents as equal partners in education has been long overlooked as a crucial component to student success.

"The evidence is beyond dispute; parental involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school," according to Ruth Yoon, Director of Parent Involvement Initiatives for the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project. Their study on parental involvement found that:

- families make critical contributions to student achievement from preschool through high school;

- when parents are involved at school as well as at home, children do better and stay in school longer; and
- when a critical mass of parents is involved, the whole school improves.

The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

- create a home environment that encourages learning;
- express high expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; and
- become involved in their children's education at school and in the community.

Parental involvement is most successful when it is viewed,

practiced, and promoted as a partnership between the home and school.

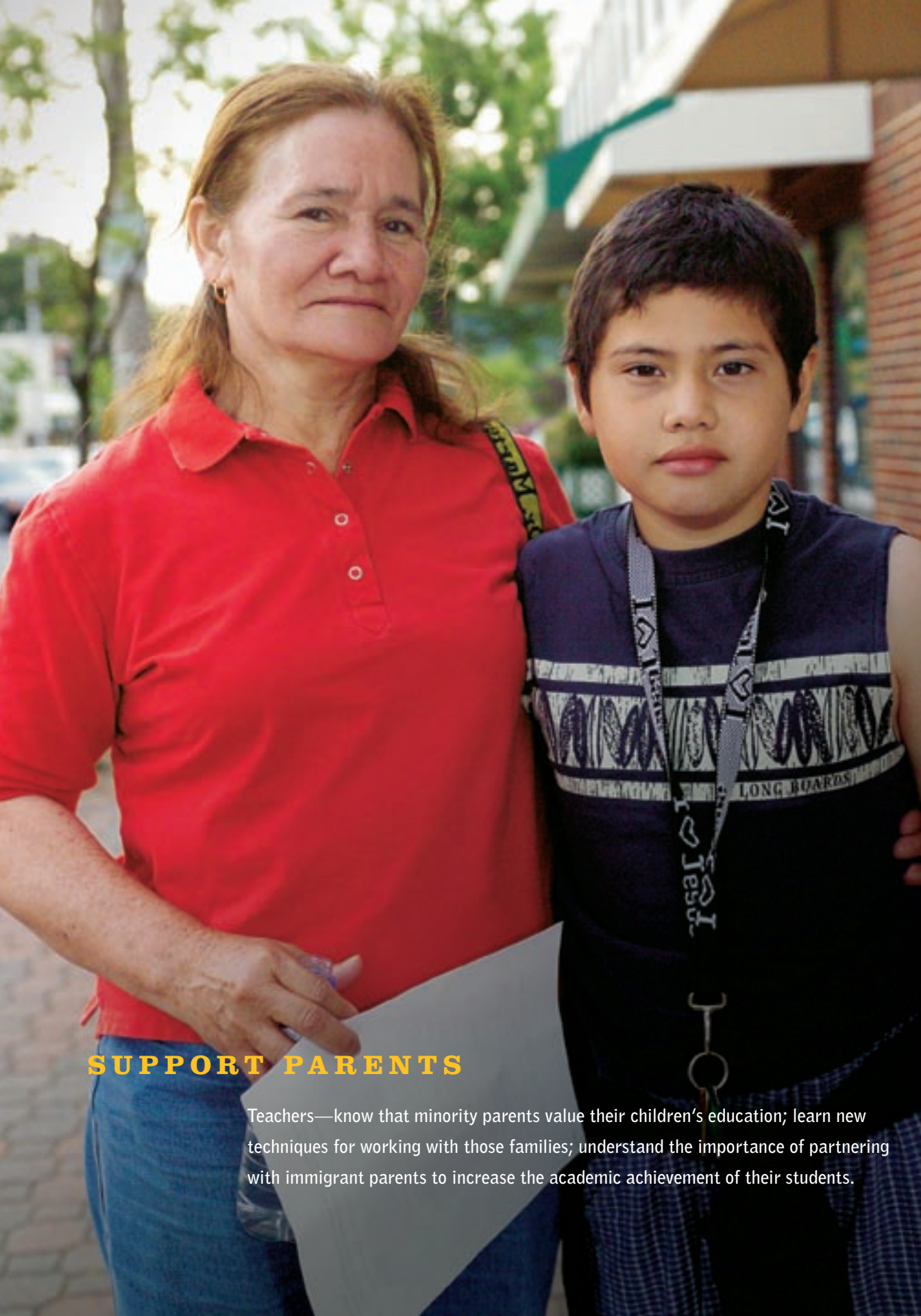
Unfortunately, many parents in our region face significant barriers to becoming involved with their children's schools and education, despite what research findings urge. Language comprehension, cultural differences, lack of transportation, limited childcare, and inflexible work schedules all contribute to keeping parents from participating in their children's academic life.

Increasingly, nonprofits that had originally helped minority parents with other social services began to see a great need for strategies to help

them feel more confident and competent in participating in their children's academic life and in advocating on behalf of their children.

The following pages show examples of how some of these area nonprofits, parents, students, and school staff are working to close and eliminate the achievement gap, their successes, and the challenges that lie ahead.





## **SUPPORT PARENTS**

Teachers—know that minority parents value their children's education; learn new techniques for working with those families; understand the importance of partnering with immigrant parents to increase the academic achievement of their students.

Forest Oak’s student body is diverse, with Latinos comprising the largest racial/ethnic group (33.5%), yet data from the 2004 Maryland School Assessment reflects the dismal situation for Latino youth. The percentage of sixth grade Latino students at Forest Oak who demonstrated proficiency in reading was 51% compared to 84% for White students. In seventh grade, 52% of the Latino students demonstrated proficiency in reading compared to 90.3% of the White students. In mathematics, the Latino students fared even worse. Only 38% of sixth graders and 30% of seventh graders demonstrated proficiency. The percentage of ESOL seventh graders who demonstrated proficiency in either reading or math was a shocking 5.6% for both.

>>> Identity

Daniel Arretche, Program Director  
301.963.5900 / [www.identity.ws](http://www.identity.ws)

Identity, a Latino-youth service agency in Montgomery County, works with at-risk middle school and high school Latino students through comprehensive, Spanish-language after-school programs. During the 2004–05 school year, the organization partnered with Forest Oak Middle School in Gaithersburg to provide Latino parents with the tools and support they need to become more engaged in their children’s academic and school related activities through a year-long series of monthly meetings on school grounds.

Identity developed a two-module parent curriculum: family building and academic tools. The first sought to improve or re-establish the parent/child relationship; the second explored themes related to the school system, academic support, and the role of parents as advocates. Identity and Forest Oak also worked to increase the school staff’s knowledge and understanding of the community through cultural competency training sessions. Twenty-six parents and 18 school personnel participated in these trainings. Parents were then able to identify needs affecting their children and other Latino families and organized a first-ever meeting with the school principal to discuss the issues and determine a role for parents and the school in addressing the problems. The issues were also raised by the parents before the board of education, city council, and various county legislators.

Montgomery County Public High Schools—2005

	Reading Proficiency	Math Proficiency
White	91.4 %	83.5 %
Hispanic	63.6 %	46.6 %
Black	65.3 %	43.0 %

“It works best when the parents themselves are the leaders. From the beginning, it has been my dream to see them in that role, and now I am seeing it.”

—M.T. Teran, the bilingual resource assistant at Claremont Elementary School

### >>> **Escuela Bolivia, Inc.**

Emma Violand-Sanchez, President  
703.228.6095 / [www.escuelabolivia.org](http://www.escuelabolivia.org)

Escuela Bolivia is a nonprofit educational organization that was established by Spanish-speaking parents to address the achievement gap, the separation of Latinos and immigrants from the mainstream, and the growing “digital divide” within the community. It works to create a supportive community that will help immigrant families succeed here while preserving their cultural heritage.

Called a “Saturday school,” Escuela Bolivia partners with the Arlington County schools to offer Saturday classes for students ages 5–19 and their parents in English, mathematics, reading and writing, and computers. During the 2004–05 school year, Escuela Bolivia offered training for immigrant parents based on the proven and nationally recognized parent involvement program, PESA (Parent Expectations Support Achievement) at Barcroft, Claremont and Randolph elementary schools, Kenmore and Gunston middle schools, and Wakefield High School.

More than 100 parents participated in a series of six two-hour classes. “The program has given a lot of parents the confidence to get more involved. We go on outings to museums and other places...we understand what is happening...we realize when there is a problem,” summarized one parent at the conclusion of the training program.



Arlington County Public School System Overall Reading and Math Proficiencies—2004

## GET INVOLVED

Parents—be involved, get training, become leaders and advocates. Demand high quality education for your children. Talk with them about their schools and going to college.





## **INCREASE AWARENESS**

Communities—mount effective campaigns so that all your children will reach high levels of academic achievement.

No issue is of greater concern to the Latino community than the educational status of its children, who now represent the second largest segment of the school-aged population, and are a significant and growing share of the nation’s workforce. This concern stems from the unsettling fact that the Latino education landscape is characterized by missed opportunities in early childhood, unsound educational treatments in elementary and secondary schools, and barriers to college.

—Raul Yzaquirre, Former President, National Council of La Raza

>>> **IMPACT Silver Spring**

Ray Moreno, Director, IMPACT in the Schools  
301.495.3336 / [www.impactsilverspring.org](http://www.impactsilverspring.org)

IMPACT Silver Spring is a nonprofit organization that works to engage and support immigrant communities and communities of color in the process of taking action, both individually and collectively, around social justice issues to ensure a better quality of life. In 2002, the organization initiated “IMPACT in the Schools,” a program focused on educational equity with the vision of successful multicultural schools where all children and families can succeed. Through focus groups and assessments, it soon became apparent that parental engagement needed to be a priority strategy to address the achievement gap.

Over the past two years, IMPACT has partnered with Piney Branch Elementary School to work with 21 African-American, Latino, and East African immigrant parents. They focused on developing three key skill sets for effective parent involvement in local schools: parenting skills; skills to develop a sustainable parent organization which can participate within and influence the system; and skills to work collaboratively across lines of difference, both within parent groups and with school system staff. They also supported another 25 immigrant parents with parent-teacher conferences.

Already, the efforts are paying off—parents are implementing strategies to effectively communicate with their children and teachers. And children participating in an after-school literacy program demonstrated a significant improvement in their reading—moving from the 50 percentile into the 75 percentile group as compared to the national average.

**Piney Branch Elementary School—2004**

	Reading Proficiency	Math Proficiency
White	93.8 %	85.6 %
Hispanic	57.2 %	49.3 %
Black	39.0 %	37.3 %



## >>> **Tenants' & Workers' Support Committee**

Ruth Dinzey, Education Project Coordinator  
703.684.5697 / [www.twsc.org](http://www.twsc.org)

Tenants' & Workers' Support Committee (TWSC) is one of the leading social and economic justice organizations in the region. Its mission is to build the power of low-income workers and people of color in Northern Virginia through community building and worker organizing; struggle against racism and sexism through education and direct action; develop multi-national leadership through political education; lead and win campaigns for social and economic justice; and democratically control or own community resources including housing, education, and health care. Since 1996, the TWSC has involved Latino immigrant and African-American parents in Alexandria Public Schools and school programs. As a result, hundreds of Latino and African-American parents have met with principals, school board members, school superintendents, attended public hearings and given testimony, participated in PTAs, and met with each other to discuss and decide issues affecting their children's education. In addition, collective action has yielded the creation of a new district-wide Parent Liaison position in Alexandria Public Schools, translation services at PTA meetings, and the hiring of bilingual parent liaisons, academic counselors, and other professionals for schools in the system.

In order to expand the scope and intensity of this work, TWSC is partnering with the Advancement Project, a democracy and justice action group in Washington, DC. Together, they are developing the leadership of majority-minority parents on equity issues as well as raising public and institutional awareness of the need for parent participation in school planning and oversight as a means to reducing racial disparities in achievement and other measures system-wide.



Alexandria City Public School System Overall Reading and Math Proficiencies—2004

“The kind of profound changes we need in order to reduce racial injustice in our public schools cannot be solved by well-intentioned middle-class advocates, let alone ‘professionals.’ It requires the active, democratic participation and leadership of the largest group of stakeholders in the public school system—parents. And in Alexandria, parents are majority African-American and Latino, majority low-income, and majority low educational attainment. Any school reform process that does not have a majority of these parents directly involved and advocating for their children is, in our view, a failure from the start.”

*—Jon Liss, Executive Director, Tenants’ & Workers’ Support Committee*



## **PROMOTE EQUITY IN EDUCATION**

Draw on the knowledge and experience of students, respecting native language, culture, and community. Challenge stereotypes and correct misinformation about people of color. Approach difference with honesty and sensitivity.

Tellin' Stories is focusing on three schools in Northeast DC that have principals who want to more actively engage parents, and parents who want to develop leadership skills and build cross-cultural relationships—Gibbs Elementary School, J.O. Wilson Elementary School, and Miner Elementary School. The student bodies at these schools are almost entirely African-American—99.3 percent of the students at Gibbs Elementary School are African-American and 0.7 Latino. “With the influx of immigrants, we see our student body is changing,” said one principal. “We want to be ready for that change. We want to better involve all parents.”

### >>> Teaching for Change

Jill Weiler, Project Director, Tellin' Stories Project  
202.588.7207 / [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

Teaching for Change provides teachers and parents with leadership and advocacy as well as curriculum, books, videos, and classroom aids to transform schools into socially equitable centers of learning where students become leaders. It also strives to help African-American and Latino parents who feel intimidated and alienated by school personnel develop effective family-school partnerships. Since 1994, Teaching for Change has used the Tellin' Stories Project—using the power of a story to connect people from diverse backgrounds—in DC schools to engage families and staff as partners in the education process so they can support, create, and demand the education all children deserve.

Through these workshops and trainings, parents learn skills to analyze the school climate, the facilities, and the quality of teaching and learning at their school. By learning to ask the right questions, parents prioritize concerns and determine who has the power to address them most immediately and effectively. Tellin' Stories supports parents in voicing their concerns at teacher meetings, school board and city council hearings, and in sessions with district wide officials. In response to the No Child Left Behind mandate for engaging parents in “regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning” and the DC Superintendent’s plan to establish a “new office devoted to parent involvement,” Tellin' Stories piloted monthly leadership trainings for five to eight selected parents at three elementary schools to develop the skills they need to become facilitators and staff liaisons. In Fall 2005, the organization will provide coaching and training to 10 parent center coordinators and parent leaders from three elementary schools in Northeast DC.

Annandale High School has pressing needs that must be addressed if it is to benefit from full engagement of its minority parent population. First, school personnel must be involved in developing and implementing strategies that will encourage a deeper level of immigrant parent involvement. In addition, immigrant parents need culturally sensitive training in parenting strategies so that they can provide their children with tools to succeed. Finally, parents would benefit from information on school structure and operation, as well as leadership strategies that will enable them to better advocate for their children.

>>> **Annandale High School**

Fay Mpras, Assistant Principal  
703.642.4100 / [www.fcps.edu/AnnandaleHS](http://www.fcps.edu/AnnandaleHS)

When Annandale High School opened in 1954, it was to an all-White, middle-class student population yet today, it is one of the most diverse schools in the nation. Its 2,446 students represent 92 countries and speak 46 different languages. The transition hasn't always been easy—in the 1990s, tensions in the school ran high and violent fights broke out along racial lines. As a result, school leaders made a commitment to build a positive school climate and to ensure equal opportunities for every student. Integral to this commitment is the goal of actively promoting the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse parents in the school culture.

This past year, 26 school personnel participated in research on improving their knowledge and skills for working with immigrants; 31 immigrant parents took English language courses; and the school conducted parenting classes and leadership training for 25 immigrant parents. These important activities have helped school personnel work more effectively with immigrant parents and have helped the parents to be more confident and competent in advocating on behalf of their children. The school has also created a Family Resource Center on school property where parents attend seminars, participate in group discussions, and obtain educational materials.



Annandale High School Overall Reading and Math Proficiencies—2004

## **MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Education leaders—think about the least advantaged student in your district, what are her options, how can they become the same as those for the most advantaged?





## **DEMAND MORE**

Students—desire to achieve. Let school leaders know you expect to graduate from high school and go to college. Have a school adviser, an adult to give you the support you need for success.

Parent participants in the Multicultural Community Service's Parents as Partners Initiative reported the following: 100% now know how to have a conference with their child's teacher or counselor; 69% encourage their child to read 3–5 times a week; and 85% know what their child needs to do to graduate from high school.

### >>> **Multicultural Community Service**

Lillian Perdomo, Executive Director  
202.238.9355 / [www.mcsc.org](http://www.mcsc.org)

Multicultural Community Service is a nonprofit community-based organization located in Washington, DC's Ward 1, the most diverse and densely populated area of DC. The organization provides translation and facilitation services, as well as empowerment programs for at-risk youth in Ward 1 (Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, and Shaw). Over the years, Multicultural Community Service has been successful in reaching and engaging neighborhood youth and, due to its multicultural staff and extensive experience in translation and mediation, has also been able to reach underserved immigrant parents and involve them in their children's education and school.

In 2004, Multicultural Community Service launched the pilot program, "Parents as Partners Initiative/Padres Como Lideres y Compañeros," in collaboration with the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the Council of Latino Agencies, Bell Multicultural Senior High School, Lincoln Multicultural Middle School, and the DC Public Schools' Office of Bilingual Education. The Parents as Partners Initiative trained parents as partners using a curriculum that has proven highly effective with immigrant parents who often feel unwelcome or insecure in their children's school because of educational, language, cultural, and economic concerns. The basic tenets of the Parents as Partners model state that parents are more likely to become involved in their child's education when they understand that they should be involved; feel capable of making a contribution; and are invited to get involved by the school and their children.

The program has been very successful for Multicultural Community Service. Fourteen facilitators completed the training and 45 parents graduated from five different junior high and high schools. Parents now feel empowered to continue meeting on their own to address the issues they feel deserve their attention and, for the first time, they felt they had the tools to be effective teachers and advocates. "Since participating in this program, my child is not as rebellious as she used to be and now she does her homework," reported a parent participant.

**“We have a challenge before us...  
the gap in student performance  
by race and ethnicity needs to be  
closed. We are committed to using  
an inclusive, collaborative process  
to respond to this challenge.  
Our intention is to empower the  
entire educational community of  
Montgomery County by organizing  
the resources, knowledge, and  
skills—and to amass our collective  
will—to fulfill the promise of  
success for every student.  
I personally believe there is no  
more important issue.”**

*—Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools*





### >>> **Closing the Achievement Gap—A Call to Action**

The programs on these pages have demonstrated many positive outcomes which are creating stronger family-school partnerships, increased parent presence in the classroom and school, greater parent advocacy, higher student attendance, higher teacher retention, improved school facilities, appropriate instruction, and greater student achievement. The strength of these programs are due to incredibly dedicated staff, flexible and responsive programming, persistence in developing various recruitment strategies, and an unwavering commitment to increasing opportunities for parents to support their children's academic success.

But huge challenges in doing this type of work persist. These include developing the collective voice of parents in order to move decision-makers; involving and developing the leadership of a much larger number of African-American and Latino parents; disseminating information in different languages; and gathering data to establish exact needs of Latino and African-American parents. These challenges present new opportunities

for policymakers and funders looking to provide supports and resources to close the achievement gap. "The impact of the language and cultural barriers, when organizing across different groups, cannot be underestimated and requires resources and deliberate strategies," observed a staff member at IMPACT Silver Spring.

The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants, and the Common Ground Fund are committed to supporting comprehensive, community-based approaches to eliminating the achievement gap among African-American and Latino students in our region. We call on area leaders, grantmakers, donors, and concerned citizens to become involved in this issue.

Policymakers can pursue proven strategies, including:

- increasing participation of minority students in challenging and advanced placement academic courses;
- investing in a highly-skilled, well-trained, and stable teaching force and educational leaders;
- implementing comprehensive, research-based models for school improvement;
- lowering class size in high-minority schools;



- expanding access to high-quality preschool programs;
  - providing extended learning time and intensive supports for students who are having difficulty; and
  - strengthening parent and community support for learning.
- providing ongoing community recognition for teachers and rewarding teachers who demonstrate success in improving student achievement; and
  - supporting research on educational reform strategies.

Grantmakers and donors can support programs in many important ways. In addition to core support, programs have a great need for funding for the following:

- providing a network for organizations delivering this type of service in order to learn about each other's projects;
- technical assistance on theory and implementation issues;
- transportation and translation services;
- developing community-wide communications campaigns that value all children and share a community's high expectations for them;
- providing cultural-competency education and training for school personnel;
- offering community incentives for students to do well in school such as scholarships and tickets to local events;

Together, policymakers and grantmakers can have a great effect on these areas. The necessary supports and resources must be offered by both the public and philanthropic sector if real change in the academic achievement gap is to occur. The achievement gap among African-American and Latino children is a crisis, but eliminating this gap is not an impossible task. As committed nonprofit leaders, parents, and school staff are showing us, it can and must be done.







1201 15th Street, NW  
Suite 420  
Washington, DC 20005

T. 202.955.5890  
F. 202.955.8084

[www.cfncr.org](http://www.cfncr.org)

*There are over 500,000 students enrolled in public schools in our region.  
It is estimated that by 2010, Black and Hispanic children will make  
up 34% of the school-age population. We must work now to close the  
achievement gap and ensure academic success for all children.*